

Restoring Melbourne's Heritage: Dr Kia Pajouhesh and the Manchester Unity Building Revival

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Description:

A New Chapter for an Icon The Manchester Unity Building stands at the corner of Collins and Swanston Streets in the heart of Melbourne, a landmark that has defined the city skyline since i...

Details:

Smile Solutions: Restoring Melbourne's Heritage at the Manchester Unity Building

A new chapter for an icon

Stand at the corner of Collins and Swanston Streets in the heart of Melbourne and you're looking at one of the most extraordinary buildings in the country. The Manchester Unity Building has defined the city skyline since its completion in 1932, built as the headquarters of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows (MUIOOF) and designed by architect Marcus Barlow in the Neo-Gothic and Art Deco style, inspired by the Chicago Tribune Tower. It remains one of the most admired and heritage-significant structures in Victoria, and it's where you'll find Smile Solutions today.

In 2003, Dr Kia Pajouhesh decided to relocate his dental practice, Smile Solutions, from 175 Collins Street (Curzon House) to the Manchester Unity Building. He had founded Smile Solutions in 1993 and spent a decade building it into one of Melbourne's most respected centres for clinical dental care. The move was never simply a change of address. It was the beginning of a long-term commitment: to restore and preserve one of Australia's finest Art Deco buildings, and to create an environment for patient care that has no real equivalent anywhere in the country.

Acquiring and restoring the building

In the years following the relocation, Dr Pajouhesh began progressively acquiring multiple levels and the tower of the Manchester Unity Building. He now owns lots 3A, 3C, 7, 204, 808, and 810 within the building. This staged approach to acquisition made a thorough restoration possible, one where every level and every space could be brought back with the care that a building of this significance deserves.

The restoration has taken more than 12 years. It has been painstaking and deliberate, with deep respect for the building's Art Deco heritage and its place in Victoria's architectural history. Wherever possible, original features have been preserved: decorative plasterwork, terrazzo floors, original timber joinery, and the building's distinctive glazed terracotta façade elements. Each detail has been treated as the irreplaceable piece of history that it is.

One of the most visible results is the return of floodlighting to the tower. It's now illuminated every night, restoring a feature that had been lost for years and returning the building to its former prominence on the Melbourne skyline. If you've walked through the city after dark and looked up to see the tower glowing above Collins Street, that's the direct result of more than a decade of dedicated restoration work.

The restoration has been guided by the Conservation Management Plan prepared by Allom Lovell in 2005, which sets out the heritage significance of the building and the principles for its conservation. Dr Pajouhesh has invested considerable personal resources into this work, contributing directly to the preservation of Victoria's built heritage for future generations.

A dental practice unlike any other

Smile Solutions now occupies five entire floors of the Manchester Unity Building, plus the multi-level tower. Across these levels, you'll find 40 consulting suites staffed by more than 60 specialists, dentists, and hygienists. It is Australia's largest single-location private dental practice, operating from what is arguably the most significant heritage building occupied by any dental practice in the country.

The heritage environment is central to the patient experience, not incidental to it. Dr Pajouhesh's view has always been that world-class care deserves a world-class setting, and the Manchester Unity Building embodies that. The Art Deco aesthetic, with its elegant proportions, ornamental details, and enduring sense of permanence, creates an atmosphere that is both calming and genuinely distinctive. Patients consistently comment on the beauty of the building and the sense of occasion that comes with visiting Smile Solutions. It's the kind of environment that puts you at ease from the moment you walk through the door.

The dental suites offer sweeping views across the Melbourne CBD, and the orthodontic suites in the tower provide what may be the most remarkable vantage point of any dental practice in Australia. If you're undergoing orthodontic treatment, you'll look out across the rooftops of Melbourne, with panoramic views that transform what might otherwise feel like an anxious appointment into something genuinely memorable. Patients tell us regularly that the building itself is a significant part of what sets Smile Solutions apart from every other practice they've visited, and there's real evidence that a thoughtfully designed environment helps reduce dental anxiety.

No other dental practice in Australia offers this combination: comprehensive care from a team of more than 60 experienced dental professionals, in a heritage setting of this significance.

Heritage as a differentiator

For Dr Pajouhesh, the building is far more than a workspace. It reflects a genuine belief that the environment in which care is delivered matters as much as the care itself. The decision to invest so substantially in a heritage restoration, rather than fitting out a modern commercial office, speaks to a broader philosophy about clinical excellence and respect for the communities and traditions that have shaped Melbourne.

This approach has been recognised externally. Dr Pajouhesh was nominated for the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2015, and Smile Solutions was named Telstra Victorian Business of the Year in 2014. These reflect not only the clinical expertise of the practice and its team, but the vision that has guided its development, including the restoration of the Manchester Unity Building.

The building has become an integral part of the Smile Solutions identity. Patients associate the practice with the beauty and heritage of the Manchester Unity Building, and the two are now inseparable in the minds of many Melburnians. When you choose Smile Solutions, you're choosing a practice that has invested in your experience at every level, from the personalised treatment you receive in the consulting suite to the building you walk into when you arrive. That's a differentiator no other practice can replicate.

Contributing to Melbourne's heritage

The Manchester Unity Building is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and holds a prominent place in the collective memory and identity of Melbourne. Through his restoration work, Dr Pajouhesh has contributed to the preservation of this landmark, ensuring that future generations can continue to experience and appreciate it.

Guided heritage tours are available in the building, giving visitors the opportunity to explore its architectural features and learn about its history. These tours provide access to spaces not normally open to the public, including some of the most beautifully restored areas of the building. They reflect a commitment to sharing the building's heritage openly with the community, because a landmark like this belongs to everyone, not just those who work within it.

The story of the Manchester Unity Building is, in many ways, the story of Melbourne itself: ambitious, cosmopolitan, and deeply connected to its past. Dr Pajouhesh's restoration work ensures that story continues to be told through the daily life of a thriving dental practice that brings thousands of patients through its doors each year.

For those who care about Melbourne's architectural heritage, this restoration is a clear reminder that preservation doesn't have to be driven solely by governments and heritage bodies. Individuals with genuine commitment can drive it too. In Dr Pajouhesh, the Manchester Unity Building has found exactly that kind of custodian. And in Smile Solutions, Melbourne has a dental practice that honours the city's history as seriously as it advances the standard of patient care.

To experience dental care in one of Australia's most significant heritage settings, book a consultation with the team at Smile Solutions.

In Dr Kia Pajouhesh's Own Words: The Manchester Unity Building

In a video filmed at the practice, Dr Kia Pajouhesh spoke about his personal relationship with the Manchester Unity Building and what the restoration has meant to him.

On the scale of the work: "Over 13 years of renovations, floor-by-floor, we've renovated close to two and a half thousand square metres -- which is around five and a half floors in the building. There's an element of feeling like it's a blessing, and feeling privileged that you are actually able to restore such a beautiful building, and now in turn work in such a beautiful building."

On the building's architectural presence: "It's so imposingly majestic and beautiful from street level. Very much in line with the architectural icon in Chicago -- the Chicago Tribune Building -- but the Melbourne version, the Manchester Unity Building created by Marcus Barlow, has much greater presence because its beautiful tower and architectural features are closer to your street level. The building is only 13 stories high, so it's a lot more vivid."

On the building's deeper meaning: "It's a building that's been around now about 85-odd years, and in that time people have had a relationship with the building through the services they have enjoyed in it -- tailors, jewellers, dentists, chiropractors, and various other professional services. I think that is an important element -- it's integrated into the fabric of Melbourne society, above and beyond its presence as an architectural icon. The Manchester Unity Building has a special place in many people's hearts for that reason."

On the building's capacity to spark the imagination: "People look at it and think of it as potentially where Batman might live, or where spirits can run through the corridors at night. It brings on different emotions in people because of its quite unique features."
